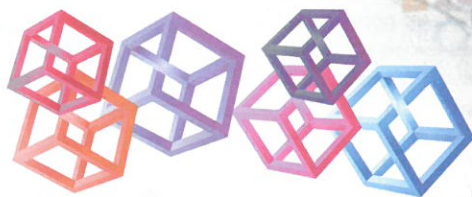


INCLUSIVE TEACHING



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Advisor :

Prof Datuk Dr. Khairuddin Ab Hamid

Editors :

Prof Dr Gabriel Tonga Noweg
Prof Dr Hong Kian Sam
Dr Fitri Suraya Mohamad

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Graphic Designer :

Pauline Beremas George

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Centre for Applied Learning and Multimedia,
Universiti Malaysia Sarawak,
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak.
Tel: +60 82 583680 Fax: +60 82 583676

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Inclusion and Inclusive Teaching:

Where Do We Begin?

By: Julia Lee Ai Cheng

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences & Human Development,

aclee@fcs.unimas.my



In the United States, where I spent five years in pursuit of a doctoral degree in Special Education, my perspectives about disabilities and social justice for children and adults with special needs were challenged, shaped, and widened. Not only did I study about the history of special education and reading disabilities (my area of specialization), I had the opportunity to observe inclusion in action. On the university campus grounds, lecture rooms, and libraries, young adults with disabilities were studying alongside their counterparts without disabilities. The university buses were installed with automated exit extension ramps for individuals with disabilities, which enabled them to get up and down the buses. The doors at the entrances of the university buildings were automated and wide enough for the individuals with disabilities on wheelchairs to enter without any help. Curb cuts on pedestrian walks provided individuals on wheelchairs/crutches or the blind the mobility and safety they would not otherwise enjoy. Students with visual impairment could do research using designated computers with screen magnification and screen readers installed at the computer labs. These first-hand observations changed my viewpoint about how university education could become accessible to individuals with disabilities. The roads, transportation systems, buildings, and lecture rooms were thoughtfully infused with elements of universal design, a concept that the designs of products and physical environments should be barrier free and readily accessible by a diverse range of users, with or without disabilities (CAST, 2011; Orr & Hammig, 2009; Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley, & Abarbanell, 2006).

Legislation: The Foundation of Inclusion

In the United States, the inclusion of students with disabilities in schools and universities is the result of various social movements, which fought for an end to both segregation and discrimination starting in the 1950s. As a result of these social movements inclusive practices were conceptualized, designed, and implemented in schools and universities. An important legislation to date is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement

Act of 2004, which mandates inclusive education among school children (Department of Education, 2004) and Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which is a civil rights law that mandates the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Department of Justice, 2009). These mandated legislations foster and enforce the systemic changes in policies and practice so that the lives of individuals with disabilities are improved.

Turning to Malaysia, there are several disability laws such as the Uniform Building By-Law 34A, which mandates the accessibility of individuals with disabilities in public buildings. Another disability law is the Persons with Disabilities Act of 2008 (Government of Malaysia, 2008), which mandates the accessibility rights of persons with disabilities to public spaces including institutions of higher learning. Despite these laws, several Malaysian studies and anecdotal reports suggest that there is still so much to be done to help Malaysian individuals with disabilities. For example, a study by Toran, Mohd Yasin, Tahar, and Sujak (2009) who examined the supports and barriers faced by university students with visual, hearing and physical disabilities reported that some of the barriers faced by these students are inaccessibility to buildings, transportation system, and computer technology. Others such as Tan (2013), a newspaper columnist and an individual with disability himself, described the significant mobility challenges he has been facing concerning inaccessible facilities in Malaysia. He also expressed his concern about the consequences of such barriers to the educational and employment opportunities among individuals with disabilities. Additionally, Kaur and Chew (2007) questioned if Malaysians were doing enough for individuals with disabilities.

These barriers, I believe, are not impossible to overcome. Individuals with disabilities in Malaysia can also enjoy inclusion in society such as higher education provided that legislations, policies, and regulations are thoughtfully drawn up, fully implemented and strongly enforced.

Is Inclusion Enough?

Experts have warned that mere inclusion does not guarantee inclusive teaching (Zigmond & Baker, 1995). Inclusion typically refers to individuals with disabilities learning alongside their peers (Haager & Klingner, 2005) while inclusive teaching refers to the design and implementation of curriculum and teaching strategies that address the needs of all students, including typical students with varying learning styles and students with disabilities (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2009).

Apart from physical disabilities and sensory disabilities, other disabilities include learning disabilities such as dyslexia, language learning disabilities, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. In 2010 and 2011, the total number of students with physical and sensory disabilities who enrolled in public institutions of higher learning in Malaysia was 1115 and 1221, respectively (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). However, these figures do not include the proportion of students with learning disabilities. An estimate of students with learning disabilities can be derived from a study on 10 public universities in Malaysia, which reported that approximately 4.66% of undergraduate students have risks of dyslexia (Ong et al., 2009). Given this proportion of students with disabilities in universities, inclusive teaching is a necessary agenda in order to meet the learning needs of a diverse range of students.

From Inclusion to Inclusive Teaching: Universal Design for Learning

Drawing from my experience at Florida State University, faculty support and the Student Disability center make it possible for students with disabilities to thrive in the university teaching-learning environment. The Student Disability center is responsible for providing services such as accommodations (e.g., testing accommodations), assistive technology (e.g., screen readers and speech recognition software), learning strategies, and support groups. Every course that I took had the following statements in the course syllabus prepared by the faculty:

"Students with disabilities needing academic accommodation should (1) register with and provide documentation to the Student Disability Resource Center, and (2) bring a letter to the instructor indicating the need for accommodation and what type. This should be done during the first week of class. This syllabus and other class materials are available in alternative format upon request. For more information about services available to FSU students with disabilities, contact the: Student Disability Resource Center, 874 Traditions Way, 108 Student Services Building, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4167, (850) 644-9566 (voice), (850) 644-8504 (TDD), sdrc@admin.fsu.edu, <http://www.disabilitycenter.fsu.edu/>

In addition to these support systems, inclusive teaching practices that are built on a framework known as universal design for learning (UDL) are necessary. UDL, which is based on research in the cognitive sciences and learning sciences, aims to enable all learners with varying characteristics to learn through the provision of flexible goals, materials, methods, and assessments (CAST, 2011). Three underlying principles of UDL are derived from the understanding that students learn information differently, they communicate what they know differently, and they have varying motivation and interests.

The first UDL principle is the provision of multiple means of representation. This principle serves as a guideline to instructors on ways to present information based on how learners perceive and understand information. Differentiating the presentation of content through various modalities such as vision, hearing, and touch is crucial (CAST, 2011). For example, if there is a hearing impaired student in the class, then transcripts and captions must be used in the lectures and video presentations, respectively. Another strategy may be the use of mnemonics to facilitate the transfer of information learned and to help learners remember more effectively.

The second UDL principle is the provision of multiple means of expression. Findings from research on cognitive neurosciences suggest that there are differences in how learners express and communicate what they know (CAST, 2011). Thus, course instructors must provide learners with the flexibility to choose how they would like to express what they know. For example, in an undergraduate psychology class, students may be given the option to draw, sing, do a sketch, or present orally what they know about the different types of memory strategies. For students with dyslexia, an alternative would be to provide them with the option to express their understanding orally rather than in written form (CAST, 2011).

The third UDL principle is the provision of multiple means of engagement. Learners differ in their levels of engagement, motivation, and interests. Therefore, course instructors must be flexible in giving extrinsic rewards or fostering intrinsic motivation so that learners are engaged in the learning situation. For example, students who have difficulty absorbing a large amount of instruction may need to have checklists, reminders, and feedback on ways to chunk information. Additionally, lectures may be supplemented with videos and diagrams to foster student engagement (CAST, 2011).

Not all university instructors are familiar with inclusive teaching and the application of the UDL in inclusive teaching. Thus, workshops on these two concepts should be offered to university instructors so that they become more receptive to having students who are different from the mainstream students; so that they can design their syllabus for all students; and so that they have the approachability and empathy when interacting with all students including those with physical, sensory, and/or learning disabilities (CAST 2011; Orr & Hammig, 2009).

Conclusion

The effective inclusion of individuals with disabilities in society certainly requires multiple change agents (for example, government, municipal councils, companies, non-governmental organizations, and institutions of higher learning). The university, being a crucial change agent in the society, is a good place to begin this initiative. Given the intricacies involved in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities in universities, catalytic changes must occur in several areas: legislations, policies, and regulations; education about inclusion and inclusive teaching; advocacy by others for individuals with disabilities; self-advocacy by individuals with disabilities; support systems such as student disability resource center and writing center; and last but not least, the implementation of universal design in the university environment. Universities should also actively create awareness among university students about the various types of disabilities and encourage qualified individuals with disabilities to pursue higher education. As a step forward in this direction, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak will be offering an undergraduate generic course entitled "Learning Disabilities: Theory and Practice" in the coming semester. The goals of this course are to create awareness among university students about learning disabilities and advocacy for themselves and/or others.

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